

Section 1 Olfaction and Memory

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"When nothing else subsists from the past, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered· the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls· bearing resiliently, on tiny and almost impalpable drops of their essence, the immense edifice of memory"

-Marcel Proust "The Remembrance of Things Past"

Last week when I was in New York there was this good smell coming out of this restaurant and right when I smelled it, the smell brought back memories of this one festival I went to in Japan almost 3 years ago. On another occasion this perfume a girl was wearing brought back memories of a girlfriend in high school. Of all the senses I would say that smell is the sense that is best at bringing back memories. When you smell a certain scent it feels as though you slipped back in time and that you are actually at that scene again. If it was not for the other senses of your body, you might really feel as though you are back there again. But why is it that smell has this ability to instantaneously trigger memories of events, places or people that you usually would not "think" of?

Despite the tendency of humans to underestimate the role of smell in our every day lives, for most mammals, smell is the most important sense. Dogs are probably the most obvious example of this, it is through the use of the olfactory system that animals are able to find food, reproduce, and even communicate. While being one of the oldest and important parts of the brain, our failure to fully realize the importance of the olfactory system resulted in it being surrounded by numerous questions. How does it work? How do we identify smells? While these are only a few questions out of a whole list, research has progressed in recent years that we know much more about the olfactory system than before, but the fact remains that much remains to be found.

Through research conducted on mice, it is approximated that humans have 1000 different sensors in their nose. While this might seem like a large amount of sensors, it is not enough considering mice and humans can identify about 10,000 odours. The mystery surrounding this ratio can be explained through the unique features of the olfactory system. Odours are molecular so the method used is different from light or sound that comes in waves.

Inside your nose about the level of your eyes, is a small patch of tissue containing millions of nerve cells. The odour receptors (sensors) lie on these nerve cells. Each of the receptors recognizes several odours, and likewise a single odour could be recognized by several receptors. Thus similar to codes, what happens is that different combinations of the 1,000 receptors result in our ability to identify 10,000 different odours. Linda Buck, an associate professor at Harvard, makes an analogy of this quite efficient system to letters being used in different combinations to make individual words. She goes on to say that this system 'greatly reduces the number of sensors needed to code for the smells".

The process that takes place is quite complex. After an odour molecule enters the nose and are recognized by the olfactory sensors, the signals are eventually sent to the olfactory bulb that is located right above the eyes. The signals only go to two areas in the olfactory bulb, and signals from different sensors are targeted to different spots that then form a sensory map. From there the signals reach the olfactory area of the cortex (smell sensory cortex).

An important quality of the olfactory system is that information travels both to the limbic system and cortex. The limbic system is the primitive part of the brain that includes areas that control emotions, memory and behaviour. In comparison the cortex is the outer part of the brain that has to

do with conscious thought. In addition to these two areas, information also travels to the taste sensory cortex to create the sense of flavour. Because olfactory information goes to both the primitive and complex part of the brain it effects our actions in more ways than we think.

Many wonder how certain smells able to trigger memories of events taking place several years ago despite the fact that sensory neurons in the epithelium survive for about only 60 days. The answer is that the neurons in the epithelium actually have successors. As the olfactory neurons die, new olfactory neurons generated by the layer of stem cells beneath them, which eventually takes the role of the old neuron as it dies. Linda Buck points out that the key point to the answer is that "memories survive because the axons of neurons that express the same receptor always go to the same place". The memories are stored in the hippocampus, and through relational memory certain smells trigger memories.

Another popular question is the reason behind smell having such a strong role in instantaneously recalling memory. Despite our belief that sight and hearing are the two most important senses to our survival, from an evolutionary perspective smell is one of the most important senses. To recognize food or to detect poison, smell is the sense that almost all other mammals use. Because of this basic feature yet vital role, smell is one of the oldest parts of our brain. Trygg Engen, a psychology professor at Brown University notes that smells serve as "index keys" to quickly retrieve certain memories in our brain. This primitive yet essential role is probably why smells trigger memory more than does seeing or hearing.

Professor Engen goes on in attempting to further explain the relation of odour and memory. His controversial views basically state that the way we sense odours are all results of "nurture" and not "nature". He says that initially all smells are neutral, and that whether an odour is pleasant or unpleasant has to do with the initial condition in which the smell is perceived. It follows from this that when we smell odours, it triggers a certain memory that has to do with that particular odour and thus is decided whether it is pleasant or unpleasant. Engen's views are controversial because of the lack of convincing data to back his views up. Although certain points about Engen seem to make sense, such as how odour serve to trigger memories like index keys, his views about the "nurture" vs "nature" are a little harder to understand. If odours are decided by "nurture", it leaves the question of how so many people have a similar view towards many odours. There is probably nobody who would say that the smell of rotten food is good. Yet Engen's views are definitely worth considering because for some odours like gasoline, some people say it is good while others detest it.

It is said that people can identify about 10,000 different smells, but how many smells can you name off the top of your head? In comparison, look at how many colours there are in a crayon box, or the many varieties of music existing. This lack of understanding and appreciation of odours is a result of our over reliance on our eyes and ears, even to the extent that we suppress our awareness of what our nose tells us. Our underestimation of the role of smell results in our lack of extensive knowledge concerning many aspects of the olfactory system. But as Proust stated, smell has such a strong power to vividly bring back memories, it is definitely more important than we realize. To a large extent smell is more personal than other senses so it brings back memories of people, not just places, or things.

Section 2 Preparatory tasks.

Read *Spies*, by Michael Frayn and then answer the questions, focusing, where appropriate, on the differing realities and differing perspectives of the central characters.



European privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*)

Creating and Presenting: *Spies*, by Michael Frayn

Chapter 1

1. *The third week of June, and there it is again: the same almost embarrassingly familiar breath of sweetness. It's not like the heartbreaking, tender sweetness of the lime blossom... or the serene summer happiness of the honeysuckle.* (p. 3)

Where and when is this chapter set?

2. The olfactory sense (smell) is the most evocative of the human senses. Read the following articles before proceeding.

<http://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2001/06/28/313347.htm>

<http://www.tsbvi.edu/seehear/summer05/smell.htm>

It would be a good idea to make a few notes about the link between the sense of smell and memory.

What has prompted the narrator's 'homesickness' or nostalgia?

3. Paragraph 2 (p.3) demonstrates that the narrator is 'torn' –explain what he is feeling and why.
4. What differing realities are suggested on the first page of the text?
5. Why would someone want to revisit the past... 'like to think about [the past] at some length'? What does it tell us about the narrator's sense of reality?
6. What is known of the narrator at the end of this chapter? Compose a short biography of the narrator.
7. The 'voice' of chapter one is contemplative and slow. What do you think was the author's purpose in writing it this way. Select some key expressions that create this tone/mood.
8. Explain how the author creates a sense of fragmentary memories. Cite evidence from the text to prove your point.
9. The word that is important in the first chapter is 'liguster' the name of the plant the scent of which he is struggling to place. How is the plant described? Cite evidence from the text.
10. For Stephen the past is literally as well as metaphorically a 'foreign country'.... Explain what this means in the context of the novel.

Chapter 2

1. What do we learn in this chapter about Stephen Wheatley and his life as a child? What does he **know** and **what is implied** about the 'reality' of his circumstances?
2. Compare and contrast the two boys – Stephen and Keith. What is suggested about their differing lives?
3. What does the following excerpt mean?
'This is what I see as I look at it now. But is that the way that he sees it as his age? I mean the awkward boy who lives in that unkempt house between the Hardiments and the Pinchers – Stephen Wheatley...' (p 12)
What concept is the author alluding to? Do we always 'know' that we 'know' something? Think back to a time when you thought you knew something, but were not sure. Write a paragraph explaining your memory of the experience.
4. What does the following tell the reader about the narrator's perception of himself? (p 16)
'... he was only the first in a whole series of dominant figures in my life whose disciple I became.'
5. What prejudice is reflected in the following (pp16-17)?

'It was Keith who's discovered that Trewinnick, the mysterious house next to his with the perpetually drawn blackout, was occupied by the Juice, a sinister organisation apparently behind all kinds of plots and swindles.'

6. Compare Keith's mother and Aunt Dee. What does the comparison suggest about their differing lives and realities?
7. Describe Uncle Peter. Research the role of the RAF during World War II. Find some images of the RAF uniform and insignia. What was the stereotypical view of the RAF pilot during WWII?
8. Write a short character study of Stephen's father.
9. Why do you think he 'spoke slowly and carefully'? (p 27)
10. Research each of the following: 'Arcadia', 'Atlantis', 'Garden of Eden'. What point was the narrator making on page 30? What sense of reality is implied?
11. Research the use and effects of the incendiary bomb during WWII.
12. What were the implied meanings of 'My mother is a German spy'?
13. Many of the triggers to Stephen's memory are not visual. What are the other important sensory images?

Chapter 3

1. Did Stephen believe Keith? Explain Stephen's differing perceptions of the revelation that Keith's mother was a German spy.
2. What is implied by the expression 'the Duration'? What reality does it suggest?
3. Why do you think that Stephen became engaged with Keith's revelation?
4. The hideaway in the privet hedge had been used previously: *Two summers ago this was our camp, where we plotted various expeditions into the African Jungle and took refuge from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Last summer it was our hide, where we did our birdwatching. Now it's to be the headquarters of a much more serious enterprise'*(p 52). What reality is suggested by this passage? What does it tell the reader about the two boys?
5. Why do you think the boys don't refer the matter to an adult? What does the reluctance to speak to an adult suggest about the world/times in which the text is set?
6. How does the 'oath' (pp 55-56) reinforce the 'seriousness' of the situation? What is learned about Keith's character in this situation?

Chapter 4

1. Identify all the references to Stephen's 'Jewishness' in this chapter. Does Stephen identify them as racist slurs? How does he 'explain' the abuse to which he is subjected? Does Keith know that Stephen is Jewish? How do we know?
2. How does revelation of Stephen's 'Jewishness' impact the reader's perception of his situation?
3. How would you explain that Stephen does not seem to have understood that he was Jewish?
4. How would you explain Keith's dismissive response to Stephen's statement that his father is a 'German spy, too'? (p 68)
5. What is the 'War Effort' referred to on page 71?
6. What 'facts of life' during the Duration are referred to in the following text? 'There is Paradise – the station where my father catches the train every morning – the munitions factory where Mr Pincher does his pinching – the golf course where German panes land in the darkness.'
7. What is implied by: '... the kind of behaviour you'd expect from round-the-corner children'?
8. Explain the meaning of: *'Keith's eyelids come down. I understand. If theories involving secret passages, rockets, time travel, and the like are to carry conviction, they have to be uttered in his voice, not mine.'*(p 78)

Chapter 5.

1. When the narrator reflects on his life in the Close, he realises with surprise that the area he lived in had been new 'like a Potemkin village' (p 85) a 'sudden new colony' (p 86). What is meant by the reference to a 'Potemkin village'? What does it tell us about his changing senses of reality? What conclusion does the author intend the reader to draw? Do you think the name 'Paradise' was meant ironically? Explain your reasoning.
2. Explain what lay outside the Close.
3. Read the following extract from the text and then write a (paragraph at least) personal response to the ideas:
So many things in life seem to be a test of some kind. Ten times a day, if you're a boy and hope to be a man, you're called upon to brace yourself, to make a greater effort, to show courage you don't really possess. Ten times a day you're terrified that once again you'll reveal your weakness, your cowardliness, your general lack of character and unfitness for man's estate. It's like the War Effort, and the perpetual sense of strain it induces, of guilt for not doing enough towards it. The War Effort hangs over us for the Duration, and both the Duration and the long examination board of childhood will last forever.
4. How would you explain Stephen's consternation when Barbara Berrill intrudes into what he considers to be his and Keith's private domain? Why is he so concerned to appear 'all-knowing' when he clearly is not?
5. How would explain: 'I'm stung to have Keith's mother's high treason dismissed as such a mean and minor act'?
6. Research the black market trade that went on during the war in Britain. What does Stephen know about the black market?
7. What does Barbara Berrill actually tell Stephen about Aunt Dee, Uncle Peter and Keith's mother? (pp 99- 103) Why doesn't Stephen understand what she is telling him? Or does he?
8. What are the 'facts' of the situation? Explain how are these facts are open to different interpretations?
9. What is meant by the following?
'The silver-framed photograph of Auntie Dee and Uncle Peter with the wings comes into my mind. As soon as it touches the solidity of that silver frame, Barbara Berrill's story bursts like a soap bubble in my hand, and leaves nothing behind but a faint sliminess on my hands. (p 102)
9. Explain (all the reasons) why Stephen was embarrassed when Keith's mother asked to enter the secret hideaway? Why is he tongue-tied?
10. What is Stephen's reaction when Keith's mother says: 'It would be a terrible shame if you upset any of the neighbours. For instance, I think it might be perhaps just a tiny bit rude if you actually followed people around' (p 107)?
11. What does Keith's mother's 'chat' with Stephen in the hideaway reveal about her situation/sense of reality?
12. Why is Stephen 'half relieved and half disappointed' when Keith's mother does not 'confess' to him?
13. What does she mean when she says 'Thank you for having me' as she leaves (p 110)?

Chapter 6

1. With what quandary is Stephen struggling at the start of chapter 6? What does this tell us about his character?
2. Why does Stephen decide to go to the tunnel alone during the night?
3. Stephen's father to this point in the text has been quiet and reserved. How do you account for the change in him (p 119)? 'Oh this was some tomfoolery with Keith, was it?' shouts my father. I've never seen him in this state before.
4. How do you explain Stephen's refusal to tell his parents about where he has been? (p 119)

5. Do you agree with his assessment that he has 'failed again'? (p 120) Explain your thinking.
6. The next day Stephen relates his adventure to Keith, who is not impressed. Stephen realises that Keith will not allow him to shine: *He's the one who's the hero of our projects, not me* (p 121). What does this reveal about the 'reality' of their friendship?
7. Why is Stephen so desperate for Keith's approval?
8. Research: characteristics of people who are repeatedly bullied. Then assess the degree to which Stephen displays these characteristics. How do you explain Stephen's transformation into a bully himself when the boys are tormenting the hidden man? *I can't help laughing at the thought. I can't wait to see the comical terror on the old man's face'* (p 131). Stephen seems to be elated by realising that the 'tramp' is 'scared of me. *He's that low in the table of human precedence'* (p 130).
9. Only after they are exhausted does the enormity of what they have done dawn on the boys. Stephen tries to deny the possible consequences of his actions: *The old man's not dead, though. How could he be dead? People don't die from a bit of teasing!'* (p.132). Why do you think Stephen draws this conclusion? Who do you think he used as the source of this conclusion?
10. Why was Keith's mother disappointed with Stephen? Explain what you think she would have been thinking.

Chapter 7

1. The chapter opens with the question: *So how much did Stephen understand at this point about what was going on?* Remember, what we know and what the boy knew need not be the same. What do you think he knew and why?
2. Can human action ever be fully understood, even our own actions? Reflect on times from your own life when you have not been able to explain why you did something, or why you chose not to act when you wanted to. How would you explain your own actions in the circumstances? How have those actions shaped your life?
3. How do we explain why humans engage in warfare? How did the contemporary social circumstances influence what Stephen did or did not know about what was going on?
4. The narrator suggests that Stephen did not really think about what Mrs Hayward was doing, and saw no conflict between the different ideas he held even when they clearly contradicted each other. Just as he thought the man hiding under the corrugated iron sheet was both a tramp and a German, but not a German tramp, so he could think that Mrs Hayward both was and was not a spy. The concept recalls the earlier comment that the bread knife was and was not the bayonet, just as the Host both is and is not the body of Christ. How effective is the author in convincing the reader that Stephen held these incongruous ideas to be true? Are there situations in life where we do this? For example, do we suspend disbelief when a friend tells us something that we don't believe to be true?
5. What does the reader learn about the cruelty within Keith's family?
6. Why did Keith accept the punishment when he knew he had not taken the thermos?
7. Why doesn't Stephen go home when Keith tells him to?
8. What does Keith's silence during his caning tell us?
9. On the surface the Haywards seem to be living an idyllic life. Explain what is really the case.
10. When Stephen goes in search of Keith's mother and tells her about the thermos, what has he actually revealed? Explain in detail.

Chapter 8

1. Stephen considers telling an adult about what he thinks might be going on, but resolves '*it's telling tales, there's no getting away from it'* (p 153). Why does he do this? What does it tell us about him and the circumstances of the time?

2. Research: vertigo. What is vertigo and what are the physiological symptoms? Keep some notes.
3. What induces the feelings of vertigo in Stephen? What is being implied?
4. What evidence is there that Stephen is 'growing away from' Keith?
5. Explain the symbolic significance/meanings of *Lamorna*.
6. What does Barbara Berrill represent/symbolise? How does her character contribute to the development of the narrative/plot?

Chapter 9

1. Put yourself into Keith's mother's position. What 'drove' her to ask for Stephen's help?
2. What did she mean when she said: *You understand that sometimes people find themselves isolated. They feel that they're outcasts, that everyone's against them. You've seen boys at school being picked on for one reason or another. Perhaps because of something that they can't help at all – something about the way they look, or the way they talk, or because they're not good at games. Or even because of nothing at all. Just because they're who they are. Yes?*
3. Who did Stephen think of? Why? Explain.
4. Why did Stephen 'agree' to help her?
5. When Barbara arrives, why did his 'heart sink'? What does this represent? How is the 'tension' resolved?
6. When Mr Hayward refers to Stephen as 'old chap' Stephen notes the familiarity: *he called me 'old chap', almost as if I were one of the family*. What are the sinister undertones to this familiarity?
7. What does Stephen 'learn' about human experience from his meeting with Mr Hayward?
8. Why does he relinquish the basket even though he did not want to do so? What does this tell us about 'propriety'?
9. Why does Stephen 'run home to Mummy'? What does it tell us about how he was feeling at the time? Why doesn't he tell his parents? Why does he get into bed with them during the night? How would you describe his life/reality at this stage?
10. What has he resolved to do by the time the morning dawns? What is his motivation for 'going down into the living grave'?
11. How has the nature of the 'game' changed when the 'man in the living grave' speaks his name? Explain your response.

Chapter 10

1. The chapter opens with: *Did Stephen understand at last who it was down there in the darkness, when he heard his own name spoken?*
How do you explain Stephen's continued lack of understanding about the identity of the 'tramp'?
2. Why does Stephen obey when 'the tramp' asks him to stay?
3. What does 'the tramp' give to Stephen to pass on to Keith's mother? What is its significance? Why doesn't Stephen give it to Keith?
4. What differing realities are revealed in the privet when Keith uses the 'bayonet' to pierce Stephen's throat? What character traits are revealed in the boys?
5. What is 'suggested' by Stephen's father's treatment of Stephen after the neck wound is discovered?
6. What reality is implied by: *I thought they took him away... after that little boy was interfered with?*
7. How would you explain Stephen's decision to go out in the middle of the night to hide the scarf beside the embankment?
8. What is your interpretation of what Stephen witnesses near the railway embankment?

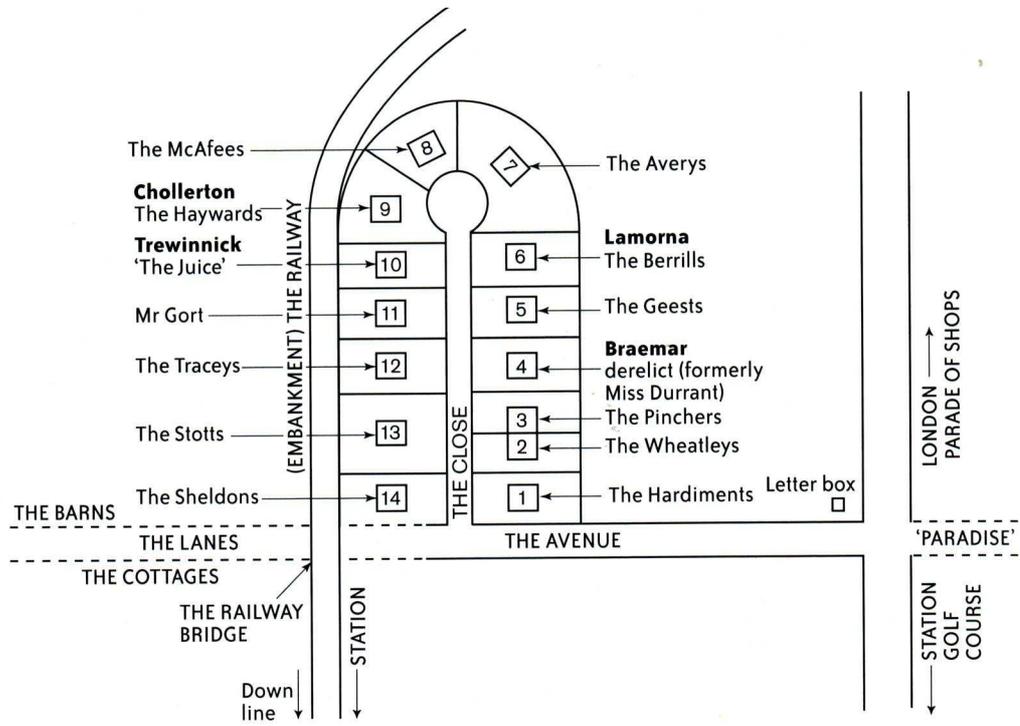
Chapter 11

The final chapter is told entirely from the present day. The omniscient narrator is immersed in nostalgia for the past. All the 'mysteries' are cleared up.

1. Summarise all the revelations that are made clear in this final chapter.
2. What is the effect of the adult Stefan admitting that he knew it was Uncle Peter as soon as he called him by name.



Section 3: Map of The Close



Section 4: Introducing the Context: *Whose Reality?*

Read and annotate: **Whose Reality? In *Spies* by Michael Frayn**

Whose Reality? In *Spies* by Michael Frayn

Multiple realities

One of the central ideas of the *Context Whose Reality?* is that people experience reality in different ways, effectively meaning that there are multiple realities, perhaps as many realities as there are people. When we ask the question 'Whose Reality?' we are gesturing towards these different experiences. However, it is possible to argue that there is only one reality, and it is only our perception of it that varies, not the reality itself. It is commonplace that witnesses will sometimes give wildly differing reports of the same event. There is a limit to how much we can trust our senses. We can be utterly convinced that we saw a particular thing, only to have it contradicted by other available evidence. Our perception is therefore not always the most reliable guide to reality, and some versions of reality can be more reliable than others. Also consider the ways in which our experience of reality can alter over time and how we can potentially have multiple realities over our lifetime.

Emotional realities

Our emotional state can play a big role in the way we experience the world. Our reality can vary from one day to the next depending on the way we feel, whether we are unhappy or joyous. The idea of empathy – being able to understand and share the feelings or emotions of another – is dependent on our being able to cross over from our own to others emotional realities. Although we often react to events in an emotional way, it is usually perceived as problematic if we are excessively emotional in the way we respond to the world. We may attempt to conceal our emotional reality from others, with varying degrees of success, because we don't wish others to know what we are feeling.

Constructed realities

In his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell depicted a world where those in positions of power shaped reality for those they wished to control. They manipulated the media, changing stories as it suited them, and even altered the language itself to inhibit the capacity to rebel against the system. Propaganda is a tool used by governments and others to shape reality to their own ends and put forward their own version at the expense of others. The media plays a clear role in constructing reality for people: we know what is going on in the world through our consumption of print, television, radio or Internet. If the media doesn't report something then it is not part of our reality.

Writers and directors can be seen as constructors of reality of the texts they create. They can manipulate the reader or viewer into accepting a certain vision of reality within the pages of a book or on the cinema screen. Writers can employ tools such as point of view to shape the reality experienced by the reader. We experience a text differently if it is written in the first person rather than the third person. A first person account is one that is narrated from the point of view of a character in the story and is necessarily limited because that character can't see into the minds of the other characters. A third person account is written from a distanced perspective and may offer a seemingly more objective point of view. Similar effects can be produced on film with different kinds of camera shots – for example, a long shot often suggests a detached perspective on events, while a point-of-view shot can be used to suggest an individual's perspective.

Cultural realities

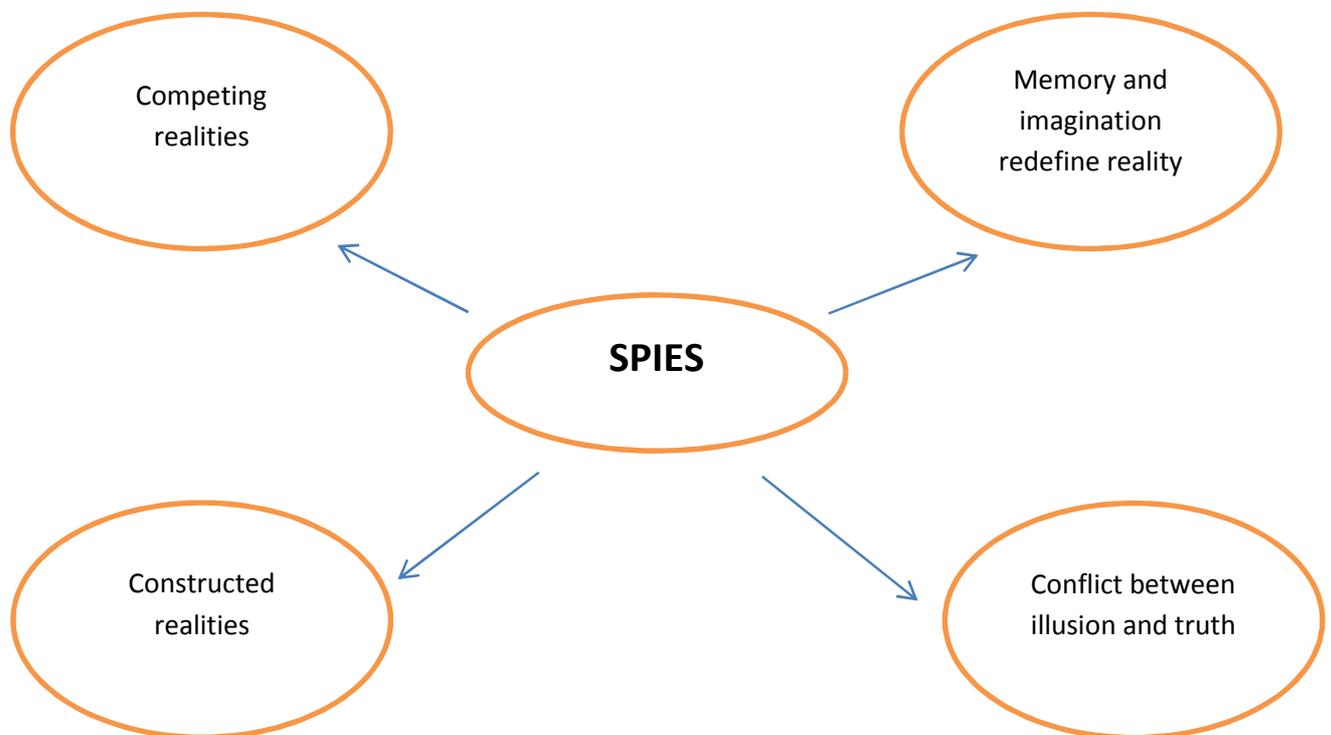
The Greek historian Herodotus wrote that 'Custom is king of all', meaning we shouldn't apply our own beliefs and practices to people from different cultures. Manifestly, there are different ways of interacting with each other and the world around us that depend on where we live and the traditions we observe. Does this mean that Australians inhabit a different reality to, say, Indonesians? Cultures are not constrained by national borders, of course. Different cultures

frequently rub shoulders with each other, and this can sometimes lead to conflict. Alternatively, we might find ourselves enriched through interaction with another culture, and our perspective on reality could be broadened. Religion also falls into this category. If you are someone who believes in reincarnation, or the continued existence of the soul after death, then you will have very different views about the nature of reality from someone who doesn't believe in those things.

Psychological realities

The world of psychology is of tremendous relevance to exploring the Context Whose Reality? Particular psychological terms relevant to this Context include 'reality principle' and 'reality testing'. 'Reality principle' refers to the way in which we subconsciously moderate our pleasure seeking impulses so that we meet the demands of the real world. 'Reality testing' refers to the way in which we objectively evaluate our thoughts and emotions against real life, something that people suffering from psychosis or delusions are unable to do.

Use the format below to explore the different 'realities' evident in Michael Frayn's *Spies*.



Spies depicts, at its core, a painful adult drama of betrayal and conflicting loyalties. The way in which this drama is played out encompasses several different perspectives, each with its own agenda and each representing a different reality. While the younger Stephen's viewpoint predominates, the adult narrator attempts to tease out 'what really happened', inviting the collusion of the reader in solving the mystery. Readers are left to draw their own conclusions from the complex web of obfuscation (concealment) and deception that emerges.

Frayn explores the roles that memory and imagination play in our interpretation of the world. Despite the conviction they bring to the task, the boys' convoluted fantasy is unsustainable. As the narrative unfolds, the disparity between the world of childhood and the world of adulthood becomes distressingly clear. The text also questions the integrity of memory and the extent to which we can construct the past with exactitude. What seemed real at the time is challenged by the adult Stefan. Memory is presented as a literal and metaphorical journey. Stefan flies off to that 'far-

off nearby land' (p 4) to revisit his childhood, an impulse triggered by the provocative sweetness of the privet blossom. His destination is "memory Lane' and the final point before he goes 'round the bend' and turns into 'Amnesia Avenue' (p 6). What he finds there is startling. Finally, the text calls into question the extent to which we can really 'know' those around us. The private reality of parents and friends is often very different from that which is represented on the surface.

Childhood fantasy versus adult reality

Stephen's friendship with Keith Hayward provides a robust insulation against the reality that lurks outside the 'quiet, sweet, dull ordinariness' (p 9) of the Close. The adult world that surrounds them is harried and preoccupied. Father and uncles are absent. Rations are in short supply and the black market thrives. The nightly blackout is a stark reminder of the bombings that devastate the rest of London and indeed, the Close has its own 'melancholy little landscape of uncleared rubble' (p 30) that once had Miss Durant's house (Braemar). Frayn sketches in these contextual details with a light touch for, although the war clearly impacts on their lives, the children in the Close coexist alongside the adults in their own individual ambit. If anything, the wartime setting intensifies the divide between the adult world and their own. For example, the general consensus is that the Berrill girls are 'running wild' (p 13) while their father is away in the army.

Similarly, Stephen and Keith are often left to their own devices to construct a make-believe world that is more exciting and authentic than anything else that immediately surrounds them: 'There are a great many projects in hand and a great many mysteries to be investigated' (p 19). Their schemes range from an overhead cableway that connects their two houses, to an underground tube system through which the boys can travel around the Close incognito while they conduct their surveillance of the neighbourhood. Their time together is spent reinventing their surroundings and exploring possibilities that open up. Throughout, Stephen is humbly grateful for his 'incomprehensible good fortune' (p 16) in being Keith's friend, and is under no illusion as to who is the leader and who is being led. The narrator employs a wry joke at the boys' expense with regard to the way they frequently misinterpret and reconfigure language to fit their current venture. Sometimes this is comic – while Stephen has an inkling that spelling is not Keith's forte, the latter remains oblivious as to the difference between 'privet' and 'private'. Sometimes it is more serious – the labelling of the family from Trewinnick, 'the Juice', suggests a disturbing intolerance towards the concept of the 'other'. These misconceptions are indicative of how the boys' view of the world is shaped at least in part by their imaginations, rather than being based in reality.

Fantasy is a refuge for both boys. Stephen finds his family commendable, but boring. His father seems like 'some mild-mannered furry animal' (p 26), an innocuous presence. Stephen's mother spends most of her day 'sighing and anxious' (p 26), while his 'insufferable' (p 13) older brother, Geoff, has moved into the alien territory of adolescence. Nevertheless, Stephen has 'some kind of unconscious understanding' that these apparent disadvantages in life are a 'necessary condition of the enthralling difference between Keith's status in the world and his own' (p 26). The irony is that Keith's 'perfect world' is, in fact, lonely and regimented at best, violent at worst. An only child, he retreats into fantasy in order to escape the unpleasantness of his family life. Keith's reality is an affectionate but slightly disengaged mother and a controlling bully of a father who does not hesitate to cane his son if his exacting standards are not met. Stephen is, in fact, his only friend as the other children in the Close find him aloof and 'stuck-up' (p 99). Despite Stephen's enthusiasm, it is Keith who has the greater emotional investment in their games together. The privet hedge in front of Braemar represents the boys' secret kingdom, 'across the frontier into another country altogether' (p 52). When they are hidden in its foliage 'no one in the world can see [them]' (p 52). This domain has its own 'sacred' symbols, chief of which is the bayonet – in reality an old carving knife – an object of 'metaphysical complexity' (p 55) that highlights just how powerful the boys' imaginations are, capable of turning a discarded domestic object into an instrument of war.

As long as Keith and Stephen confine their prolific imaginations to their own projects, they can do no real harm. However, their fantasy world moves into a dangerous phase when they start to spy on Mrs Hayward. The Duration is still the 'great overarching condition' (p 21) that shapes all of their lives. Again, although the actual meaning of the term is obscure to the boys, its connotations of vigilance and ever-present danger are absorbed into their imaginative lexicon. They are so hypersensitive to the possibility that Germans might penetrate British defence that Keith's initial premise implicating his mother in espionage seems entirely plausible. Further, Keith proves adroit in distorting facts and events to fit his perception of reality. The pair start to re-evaluate Mrs Hayward's every movement, as well as the activities of various neighbours. The most innocent behaviour appears sinister and Stephen decides that nothing can be taken at face value: 'Everything that we'd once taken for granted now seems open to question' (p 41). He recognises from the outset Keith's role as 'creator' (p 53) of this instalment of their fantasy life; his friend is 'more than a protagonist in the events we're living through' (p 53). This time a game has become 'really real' (p 53) and Stephen's misgivings mount as Keith's almost fanatical devotion to the enterprise becomes clear. It is Stephen who retains a connection to the real world and belatedly realises there might be consequences to their 'investigation' that could be 'rather sad for all of us' (p44). H concludes that 'it's not as simple as [he'd] originally thought' (p 44).

As the spying proceeds, Stephen wonders what would be more alarming: to be 'living in a dream' or 'in a story that had taken over our memories' (p 74). Both possibilities allude to the frightening implications of a fantasy world that he can no longer decode and over which he has little control. This sensation of having fallen down a rabbit hole stays with Stephen. The railway tunnel through which he passes literally and metaphorically separates the world of childish fantasy from a darker adult reality. It is an entry into new and dangerous territory and as Stephen becomes implicated in the adult drama that has existed just beneath the surface all along, he experiences a corresponding loss of innocence. His own role in the 'game' starts to shift. No longer Keith's disciple, he morphs instead into Mrs Hayward's 'accomplice' (p 175) and is confronted with the tragic ignominy of Uncle Peter's desertion. The juxtaposition of the boys' game of make-believe espionage with the airman's humiliation and despair underscores just how protected Stephen and Keith are from true reality. Whilst for the boys the war is a distant backdrop to everyday life, Peter has experienced it firsthand, and found it to be more than he could bear.

Memory and imagination redefine reality

Stefan's journey in memory back to the wartime summer of his childhood highlights the enormous difficulty of looking back and remembering just what it was like to be a child. It is as much an exercise of the imagination as of memory itself. Hindsight enables Stefan to distinguish what his younger self perceived as real from what was actually happening.

Stefan's attempt to recreate the past is spearheaded by a familiar restlessness 'the terrible pull of opposites that torments the displaced everywhere' (p 229). The catalyst is the distinctive smell of the privet blossom, 'sweet, coarse and intimately unsettling' (p 234), an odour that teases at his memory with maddening imprecision. When he returns to England, everything 'is as it was' and 'everything has changed' (p 9). He commences his journey in memory by introducing the young Stephen Wheatley as a separate character, switching to the third person to describe his younger self: 'He's walking slowly, his mouth slightly open, lost in some kind of vague daydream (p 13). In this way the elderly narrator establishes himself as an actual observer of the past, watching the young protagonist from a detached, objective perspective.

Stefan acknowledges that memory is selective and, for that matter, often unreliable. What he remembers is not so much a narrative as a 'collection of vivid particulars' (p 32). The task that

Stefan has set himself is formidable. He continually tries to deconstruct the younger Stephen's mindset: 'So how much did Stephen understand at this point about what was going on?' (p 137). The boy's mounting panic and increasing sense of helplessness are poignantly conveyed. When the narrator tries to identify what was in his youthful head, he concludes, 'I imagine that it's a shifting and comfortless tangle of recollection and apprehension' (p 138). Frayn skilfully depicts the multiple realities that exist under the surface of Stephen's boyhood radar –realities to which Stephen as a child was oblivious. Some of these he learns at the time as events unfold, some emerge later when he is an adult, and some are teased out in his re-creation of the past. He reiterates the paradox that it is possible to 'know' and 'yet not know' at the same time (p 199). Stefan also uses self-deprecating humour, laced with irony, in his appraisal of his younger counterpart's behaviour. The blurring in Stephen's mind of 'Germans' and 'germs', the former synonymous with evil, but the latter just as prevalent and 'insidious' (p 140), is a case in point. His preoccupation is such that when Barbara Berrill kisses him, he is 'too busy thinking about germs' (p 186) to enjoy it. There is an underlying acknowledgement throughout the text of the feat of the imagination involved in reliving a slice of childhood and accurately rendering the truth of the experience. Ultimately, Stefan concedes that 'the old country of the past' (p 234) remains elusive, only knowable up to a point.

Barbara herself functions as a plot device, a kind of sly go-between, linking the myopic fantasy world of the boys with the more knowing perception of adolescence. When she discloses the information provided by her sister Deidre about 'Mrs Tracey's boyfriend' (p 101), she provides the reader (though not Stephen himself) with a partial clue as to Mrs Hayward's relationship to the 'German spy'.

Constructed reality

Spies explores the masks donned by individuals, either by accident or design. In many cases, a carefully constructed reality deliberately deflects the truth from scrutiny. This tension between the truth and deception remains unresolved.

When Stefan returns to the Close, he realises with surprise that the suburb in which he lived as a boy was all new. It had been assembled 'like a Potemkin village' (p 85), a 'sudden new colony' (p 86) superimposed on the long established settlements, bringing its own order and progress. Beyond the safely defined confines of this development, the old, unreconstructed world 'pursued its ancient secret life' (p 89). Frayn suggests that the reality we see before us, and what we assume to be the truth is not always the same.

Keith's house, Chollerton, exemplifies this paradox. To the impressionable Stephen, the Haywards' world seem perfect and represents a marked contrast to his own rather haphazard family life. The house is immaculately kept: 'the darkness of the panelling and the gleam of the silver and the delicate chiming of the clocks' (p 17) suggest effortless, well-regulated elegance. Even Keith's playroom, separate to his bedroom, is a controlled environment. His toys, his books, unlike those of the Wheatley boys, are neatly arranged and beautifully cared for. Stephen never questions the Hayward family's 'unshakable correctness' (p 24). However, he is intimidated by Ted Hayward who dominates his household in ways that Stephen cannot begin to guess. Hayward is uninterested in anything that cannot be quantified or measured and his contempt for 'silly' games of 'let's pretend' (p 187) is clearly communicated to Stephen. A blunt, unimaginative man, he represents the antithesis of fantasy. Ironically, his Home Guard duties are presented – at least by Keith – as 'special undercover work for the Secret Service' (p 23).

Both Haywards work hard to preserve the apparently flawless world that Stephen so admires. In her way, Mrs Hayward is as controlled as her husband. Stephen's first impression is that she is 'calm, and composed' (p 20). When the boys start monitoring her every movement, Stephen is surprised at

how much she actually accomplishes, yet she conveys an aura of unruffled serenity: 'She spent a lot of the day with her feet up on the sofa, or resting in her bedroom, and rested is how she always seemed' (p 20). With greater truth that he realises, Stephen discerns early on that the Haywards are 'plainly both skilled at concealing their real selves from the world' (p 38).

Keith's 'spying' also exposes the uneven power dynamic that operates within the boys' relationship. The success of this relationship is predicated on Stephen's admiration and compliance. Interestingly, both Keith and Stephen's parents interpret this dynamic differently and seem convinced that it is Stephen, not Keith who is the leader of the two: 'he's obviously as good as his parents are at concealing his true nature' (p 108). In reality, Keith is empowered by the relationship with Stephen who perceptively observes that '[w]ithout me, there's no-one for him to be braver than' (125). To a child disempowered by abuse, having a friend whom he can dominate is critical. Stephen's willing nature, his lower status in the social hierarchy and his flattering awe of everything the Haywards stand for make him perfect for the role. However, when Stephen ventures out independently at night, he unwittingly destabilises Keith's role as 'the hero of our projects' (p 121). As the game implodes, the uneasy line between the leading and dominating becomes blurred and Keith's control over Stephen raises the question, how 'real' is their friendship? Barbara asks, 'Is Keith your best friend ... your really, really best friend?' (p 99). By the time that Keith threatens Stephen with the 'bayonet', the latter is forced to concede that fear, rather than respect, underpins the relationship. Keith's scornful dismissal of Stephen after this incident is very revealing: 'That didn't hurt. If you think that hurt, you don't know what hurting is' (p 212). This hints at a domestic scenario where retribution goes well beyond caning for wrong-doing.

The elderly narrator's disclosure of the Wheatleys' real background is the final twist for the reader. When Stephen rather unconvincingly asserts that his father is a German spy too, in a bid for Keith's attention, he is unwittingly speaking the truth. In fact there are German spies in the Close – the youthful amateur and the 'serious and dedicated professional' (p 230). Stephen's 'scarcely noticeable' (p 26) father presents as 'extraordinarily ordinary' (p 28), yet is actually engaged in valuable intelligence work that undermines German anti-aircraft defences. His family have left behind their homeland and the persecution of the Third Reich to reinvent themselves as an English family 'we all turned into Wheatleys' (p 229). Thus, the anguish of German Jewish dislocation is another adult reality that lurks beneath the surface of Stephen's consciousness. With the same intuition he shows towards the Haywards, Stephen feels that there is 'something sad about our life' (p 65). He is puzzled by the stream of melancholy strangers who visit the house, speaking in a foreign language behind closed doors. These 'desperate fellow-refugees' (p 231) have come to his father for support. Stephen's assumption that his father's experience of trouble could not possibly compare to his own is undercut by his father's quiet statement: 'I don't like bullying ... I've seen too much of it in my lifetime' (p 213). Despite their English façade, Stephen's parents are determined to hold onto their cultural reality – even if it is covert – and acknowledge, if not actively celebrate, the Jewish Sabbath: 'It's always said to be nice if I stay in on a Friday evening, for some reason, and there's always some kind of unspoken, unexplained reproach hanging in the air if I decline the promise of this niceness and go out' (p 62). As the old man who has become Stefan Weitzler, Stephen shares the same conviction that Friday night is a time for the family to stay home together.

Conflict between illusion and truth

The contrast between the revered image of the dashing war hero and the reality of the terrified, shamed deserter underscores the sacrifice demanded of people in wartime, and the painful consequences that can result. Wartime creates heroes; it can also destroy them. Some, like Keith's Uncle Peter, are simply unable to live up to expectations and are labelled as 'cowards'. Uncle Peter is perceived as the embodiment of courage and wartime sacrifice: 'His very absence was a kind of presence' (p 25). The silver-framed photo, taking pride of place on the mantelpiece, depicts a young

man brimming with confidence and boyish glamour. The bomber pilot is regarded with reverence by the children of the Close and, in particular, Keith and Stephen: 'They gape at him, suddenly tongue-tied, their worshipping faces reflected in each of the shining brass buttons on his uniform' (p 75). It is Peter's valour that provides the inspirational yardstick against which they measure their own adventures. With heartbreaking irony, the airman describes war as a 'game' when he is trying to communicate his wretchedness to the bewildered Stephen: 'You start playing some game and you're the brave one, you're the great hero. But the game goes on and on, and it gets more frightening, and you get tired, because you can't go on being brave for ever' (p 203). It is a salient reminder to Stephen and the reader that it is not only children who can be manipulated and damaged by promises of false glory. It is also a reminder that those who were fighting the war were little more than boys themselves.

The fiction of Uncle Peter's heroism is never challenged and his reputation as the dashing young pilot remains intact. Shortly after his death on the rails, he is officially posted missing. If there are questions left unresolved, Stefan is realistic: 'Well it was wartime. Not everything was reported or spoken about (p 227). Frayn suggests that the context of war imposes its own policies and conventions, very different from the bland reality of peacetime. Not only might the death of one nameless itinerant be considered relatively un-newsworthy when set against the vast backdrop of pain and suffering, there is also the fear of damaging morale. Information during wartime is disseminated on a 'need to know' basis. Clearly the despair experienced by deserters is not something the British authorities want to publicise, lest it further undermine the confidence of an already stressed community. The cynical implication of Stephen's appraisal is that it is considered best for everybody if Uncle Peter remains the epitome of 'cheerful bravery' (p 25) committed to the defence of the Empire. The distressing reality for his widow and baby daughter is that the airman's legacy is one of shame and disgrace. He can never be honoured for what he did achieve, only blamed for what he did not.

Section 5: Social background and the Close

Spies is set in a very specific milieu. Michael Frayn grew up in Ewell, Surrey, during the Second World War, and has stated that the novel is in part autobiographical. It is a novel with a remarkably limited immediate range: all the significant characters live in a tiny close of just 14 houses, a recently built housing development. Throughout the 1930s London was expanding rapidly, and was swallowing up towns and villages that had previously been some way distant from it. Often the expansion took the form of 'ribbon development' along the line of the railway, as is the case in the novel, where the Close backs on to the Southern railway embankment, which plays a prominent part in events.

There was a housing boom in the London suburbs between the wars, and 1930s semi-detached houses ('semis'), with their distinctive architecture, remain a prominent feature of the suburbs. 'The Close' is an example of such a recent development, and when the boys go under the railway bridge to the Lanes they are visiting an old country area typical of the area prior to the recent expansion. Indeed, when they go as far as the Barns, they are nearly at the next development, which, had it not been paused for 'the Duration' of the war, would have already met up with the Close.

The Close is a group of 14 middle-class houses of moderate size, standing in their own gardens. Numbers 2 and 3 are semi-detached houses, but all the others are detached houses. Given that the prevailing pattern of construction in the London suburbs in the 1930s was rows of semi-detached houses, this makes them relatively prestigious dwellings. The semi-detached ones were, of course, less so. Stephen shared a bedroom with Geoff, so theirs either had two bedrooms, or three with the third as a tiny 'box-room'; presumably the detached ones were larger. A further subtle distinction may be drawn between the houses with names and those merely numbered.

We learn a certain amount about the social status and occupation of most of the inhabitants of the Close:

- **The Wheatleys.** Mr Wheatley seems to have quite a responsible occupation, although we do not discover what it is until the end of the novel; he is always travelling on government business. Nevertheless, it is clear that Stephen, young and old, is aware of his social inferiority to the Haywards; he shares a bedroom with his elder brother, and he goes to the wrong (but still independent) school.
- **The Haywards.** We never discover what occupation Mr Hayward has (or had, as he is probably retired. This is never stated.) His wife is, of course, a middleclass housewife – a fulltime occupation at that time, even though her only child is at least 12 years old. There are many indicators of middleclass status in the Hayward household.
- **The Berrills.** It is not clear whether Stephen views the Berrills as inferior because of their social position or because they are girls. All we know is that their father is in the army – but we do not know whether he is an officer or an enlisted soldier.
- **Auntie Dee (Mrs Tracey).** Auntie Dee has high status for two reasons: by reason of being Mrs Hayward's sister, and by virtue of being married to Peter, the RAF officer and hero.
- **The other inhabitants.** We know little about any of the other adults in the Close, but what we do know supports the view that most of them seem superficially to share similar conventional middleclass values: Mr Sheldon is forever clipping his hedge, the Hardiment children practise their scales on the piano, Mr McAfee is a special constable at the weekends but we do not know what his real job is. The Pinchers, though, the occupants of the other half of the Wheatley's semi-detached house, are 'the undesirable elements of the Close' – partly because their garden 'was a dump for abandoned furniture warped by the rain, and offcuts of lumber and metal that Mr Pincher had stolen from work.' They are characterised both by their relative poverty, in being unable to afford a detached house like the other

residents of the Close, and by their failure to keep the property in the tidy, house-proud way expected (cleanliness is next to Godliness', as the proverb goes).

Stephen is acutely aware of his perceived inferiority to the Haywards, although he is less precise about its causes. 'We're socially colour-coded for ease of reference,' he says. 'The Haywards were impeccable', he summarises. Much of this impression derives from their house; note the words used when it is first described as: 'well-oiled', 'neat', 'heavy', 'solidity'. Once inside, the description is a eulogy of its solid, middleclass character, including the 'polished oak hallstand', 'dark oak panelling', 'matching watercolours', 'china plates', and 'a grandmother clock'. Later the descriptions of the silver in the living room, and of Mr Hayward's garage, are all imbued with awe. The phrase 'irreproachably elegant lives' is actually attached to Mr Hayward's chickens, but might equally well be used of the Haywards themselves.

Keith goes to 'the right local preparatory school', whereas Stephen goes to the wrong one. Note that he does not seem aware that there were children not fortunate enough to go to private school at all; we are talking about subtle gradations within the highly stratified English middleclass. Representatives of the lower classes, as epitomised by the sullen children living in the hovels in the lanes, are an incomprehensibly alien and irrelevant species.

Apart from their size, quality and furnishings of their respective homes, there is little objective difference between the two boys, except that Stephen accepts that Keith is the leader and he is the follower. The failure of Stephen's father to maintain the garden, though, is another sign of their inferiority: 'the promiscuous muddle of unidentified shrubs that my father never tended'.

The issue was probably more acute for the parents. At various points it is possible to infer the middleclass habits that had been instilled in Stephen, especially the terror of 'germs' (now confused with Germans).

Social class was of immense importance in mid-twentieth-century Britain. It was especially of concern to those whose position in the all-important middleclass was not secure. A professional occupation, or a large house, was sufficient evidence, but for those who could not demonstrate either, the crucial criterion was behaviour, which is why appearances and conformity to middleclass values and norms were considered so important. The Haywards illustrate a number of these norms; so do Stephen and his family, at least by implication.

- **Cleanliness and tidiness.** The Hayward's house was always immaculate, whereas Stephen's was not (and his bedroom was chaotic, while Keith's was always tidy). The Pinchers, though, with their cluttered garden, were even further down the scale.
- **Germs.** Stephen has had it drummed into him (to an almost comical extent) that he must avoid 'germs', and they are mentioned several times. When Barbara kisses him, he 'hadn't really got round to thinking about whether it was nice or not. [He] was too busy thinking about the germs'. This partly reflects the recent advances in understanding the role germs play in causing infection; they were recognised as invaders of the body (just as Germans were invaders of the nation).
- **Proper speech.** Stephen has been taught to refer to adults with respect. This leads him to the comical situation where he is unable to refer to Keith's father in speaking to Mrs Hayward because he cannot find an appropriate way to refer to him!
- **Other indicators.** Speaking of Elizabeth Hardiment, Stephen says: 'her words carry authority because she wears glasses.'

Middle Class virtues were defined as those that avoided the alleged viciousness, selfishness, criminality, filth and ignorance of the working classes. Working class people were thought to be

entirely at the mercy of low appetites, so middleclass people were required to show moderation and self-control in all things; they would never become drunk, or swear or be impolite, or behave indecorously. Routine, ritual and discipline were the middleclass virtues to be set against the working class vices. The impoverished beings the boys passed on the way to the Barns were an awful threat of the fate that awaited those who fell from middle class. So, in his way, is Uncle Peter, because by failing to behave as a hero he has fallen to the lowest level of society and become an outcast.

Section 6: Plot Summary

Most of the action is remembered by the narrator after fifty years. He is recalling events that took place in *The Close*, a suburban cul de sac somewhere in England during the Second World War.

This novel has quite a complex plot based on the narrator's search for the truth behind the mysterious happenings in his typical, middle class world during his childhood and early adolescence.

Stephen Wheatley, the hero, is friends with his rather snobbish neighbour Keith Hayward. Both boys tend to have rather active imaginations and are quick to build an adventurous scenario out of any innocuous circumstance. This characteristic is heightened by the general fear in England during the war when everyone suspected that German spies were trying to infiltrate them with a view to invasion.

Against this background the boys try to do their bit for their country by keeping an eye on the goings on in their estate. The reality that they stumble on is far more mysterious than anything they could imagine. The narrative speeds up when a constable calls to the Closes to investigate a midnight prowler. The boys immediately jump to the conclusion that the prowler is a German spy.

The plot thickens when both boys notice that Keith's mother seems to write and post letters every day. This gives rise in the boys' minds to the suspicion that she too might be a German spy in cahoots with the prowler and in direct communication with Berlin! They begin to spy on her and start to peek into her diary where they discover what they interpret to be mysterious X that occurs once every month. As readers we begin to smile at their innocence.

The next phase of the mystery happens when they see her regularly bring a package to Auntie Dee's (her sister) house. Now Auntie Dee's husband is away at war and they wonder if she is using the black market to get around rationing.

They construct a hideout to better spy on her but she becomes suspicious and asks Stephen to understand her need for privacy. This only heightens the mystery and even more so with the introduction of Barbara Berrill a girl who has much more information regarding the goings on on the estate. She maintains that half of the women are cheating on their husbands and suggests that that is the reason for all the secrecy.

On an outing to the cottages (poor part of town) Keith and Stephen come across a vagabond sheltering in a hole under corrugated iron. They do not see him but only hear his sickly cough. Now this must be the German spy, they think!

Soon matters come to a crisis when Keith's mother (Mrs Hayward) asks Stephen to bring a box to the vagabond. He refuses. Later however he does visit him and the obviously dying man asks him to bring back a token (a piece of cloth) to Mrs Hayward and saying he will leave "forever" and never trouble her again.

Later that night Stephen tries to go to this mysterious man again but on his way he sees soldiers carrying the man's badly mutilated corpse. He does not understand how or why the man has died but as he returns to bed he realises that the game of spying on the neighbours is finally over.

In the 9 page epilogue the older Stephen tells us who the mysterious vagabond was and how his presence creates such scandal and subterfuge. He ties up all the loose ends of the mystery and to utter these matters here would ruin the book for anyone yet to enjoy it.

Section 7: Useful Quotations

“The third week of June, and there it is again: the same almost embarrassingly familiar breath of sweetness that comes every year about this time.”

“Glimpse of different things flash into my mind, in random sequence, and are gone. A shower of sparks...A feeling of shame...Someone unseen coughing, trying not to be heard...A jug covered by a lace weighted with four blue beads...”

“Spoken quite casually, like the most passing of remarks, as light and insubstantial as soap bubbles. And yet they changed everything.”

“There were things that no one ever explained. Things that no one even said. There were secrets. I should like to bring them out into the daylight at last. And I sense the presence still, even now that I’ve located the source of my unrest, of something at the back of it all that remains unresolved.”

“We’re socially colour-coded for ease of reference.”

“He was the leader and I was the led. I see now that he was only the first in a whole series of dominant figures whose disciple I became.”

“She spoke softly and smilingly, with a kind of calm amusement at the world and no excessive movement of her lips.”

“Auntie Dee and even the untidiness itself glowed with a kind of sacred light, like a saint and his attributes in a religious painting, because they reflected the glory of Uncle Peter.”

“He often seemed like some mild-natured furry animal.”

“What I remember, when I examine my memory carefully, isn’t a narrative at all. It’s a collection of vivid particulars. Certain words spoken, certain objects glimpsed. Certain gestures and expressions. Certain moods, certain weathers, certain times of day and states of light. Certain individual moments, which seem to mean so much, but which mean in fact so little until the hidden links between them have been found.”

“I think now that most probably Keith’s words came out of nowhere, that they were spontaneously created in the moment they were uttered. That they were a blind leap of pure fantasy. Or of pure intuition.”

“I have private reservations about the spelling, but keep them to myself, as I do all the other small occasional reservations I have about his authority.”

“She’s pretending to be part of some innocent children’s game. And all the time she’s a stranger in our midst, watching us with alien eyes.”

“Like Keith’s mother he’s putting on a performance; he’s trying to conceal his true nature.”

“Everything that we’d once taken for granted now seems open to question.”

“Whatever this inconspicuous symbol means, it’s plainly something that’s not meant to be read or understood by anyone else. We’ve stumbled across something that’s actually secret.”

“And everything in the world has changed beyond imagination or recall.”

“Keith’s eyelids have come down. His face is set and pitiless. He looks like his father. He looks as his father must have looked one grey dawn in the Great War when he fixed his bayonet to the end of his revolver for the battle that lay ahead.”

“In any case, the sense of it is plain enough – that we’re commencing a long journey on a lonely road where no one else can follow.”

“There’s something sad about our life, and I can’t quite put my finger on what it is.”

“The world has become one of those dreams where you feel you’ve lived it all before.”

“We’re there among all the others, transfigured like them by the golden light from the buttons, proud beneath the haughty stare of the eagle...”

“Even the first disappearance, that we both witnessed, has drifted back into that realm of the past where inexplicable things no long seem surprising, or in any urgent need of an explanation.”

“She’s a fine one to talk about spying, when she’s been spying herself.”

“And with a dreamlike inevitability she does indeed emerge”

“The dark of the moon’s coming, and it’s going to be more frightening than we thought.”

“Everything is as it was; and everything has changed.”

“And beyond the surfaced streets, in the pockets of land left between this new settlement and all the others appearing at the same time around other stations along the various railway lines, the old world continued.”

“The familiar world has reached out, and sealed the underworld away beneath the well-drained and well-lit surfaces. Light has joined up with light, and the haunted darkness between them has been abolished.”

“The dark and shifting dreams will resolve themselves into the familiar secret passageways and underground headquarters.”

Section 8: Feature Article

BOOKS OF THE TIMES; That Nice Lady Up the Road. A Spy?

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI
Published: April 09, 2002

SPIES

By Michael Frayn

Michael Frayn's characters, in both his novels and his plays, suffer from a form of psychological myopia, a blinded self-absorption that leads them to impose their obsessions upon the world, with comical or devastating results for themselves and everyone around them. In his previous novel, the smart and very funny "Headlong" (1999), a snobbish professor's maniacal pursuit of a painting that may or may not be a real Bruegel became a hilarious case of intellectual hubris run amok and an antic farce of snowballing errors and unintended consequences.

In Mr. Frayn's latest novel, "Spies," a similar dynamic is at work in the story of two boys' obsession with spying on their neighbors. In contrast to "Headlong," however, the results of the characters' misapprehensions are tragic not comic, and the novel consequently cannot take advantage of the author's prodigal gifts for satire and black humor.

"Spies" begins with the narrator, Stephen Wheatley, returning as an old man to visit his childhood home in London. He reflects back on his life during the blitz of World War II, and the events that altered his life.

"What I remember, when I examine my memory carefully," he observes, "isn't a narrative at all. It's a collection of vivid particulars. Certain words spoken, certain objects glimpsed. Certain gestures and expressions. Certain moods, certain weathers, certain times of day and states of light. Certain individual moments that seem to mean so much but that mean in fact so little until the hidden links between them have been found."

On the brink of adolescence, Stephen was a lonely child, whose only friend was Keith, the self-assured and vaguely patrician boy who lived down the street. Stephen idolizes Keith and Keith's family: his gracious mother; his stern, old-school father; his cheerful Aunt Dee, who lives on the same block; and his absent Uncle Peter, a Royal Air Force bomber pilot who had "flown on special missions over Germany so dangerous and so secret that Keith could only hint at them." In contrast Stephen's own family seems undistinguished and hopelessly eccentric: he despairs of his father's penchant for corny expressions (like "shnick-shnack"), and their shabby, second-rate house.

Under Keith's leadership, the two boys spend hours every afternoon cooking up imaginative fantasies: that a sinister organization called the Juice occupies a

neighbor's house, that another neighbor named Mr. Gort is a murderer. One day these fanciful games take a sinister and unexpected turn, when Keith announces that his mother is a German spy. It is an assertion that will trigger a series of romantic and self-dramatizing fantasies, an assertion that will have a terrible fallout on all their lives.

Keith and Stephen begin assiduously spying on Keith's mother: they discover mysterious symbols in her diary, corresponding to the lunar calendar, and they discover that she makes mysterious trips to the edge of town, where she leaves -- or appears to leave -- messages for a stranger. They suspect that she may be spying on the local train (which occasionally transports war materials), or spying on her unsuspecting neighbors.

Their surveillance gives Keith and Stephen a sense of mission. "After all the days and years of small fears and boredoms, of small burdens and discontents, importance has come upon us," Stephen thinks. "We've been entrusted with a great task. We have to defend our homeland from its enemies. I understand now that it will involve frightening difficulties and wrenching conflicts of loyalty. I have a profound intimation of the solemnity and sadness of things."

Using the voice of the older Stephen to comment on the action, much the way a voice-over might be used in a movie, Mr. Frayn harps needlessly -- and endlessly -- on how this episode marked the end of Stephen's innocence and his initiation into the ambiguities of grown-up life. Parallels are drawn between his own tentative flirtations with a girl and the more mysterious sexual shenanigans of the grown-ups he sees around him, just as parallels are drawn between his own ventures beyond the safe confines of his neighborhood and Britain's initiation, with World War II, into a dangerous new world.

Like many of Mr. Frayn's earlier characters, Stephen has a deep-seated craving for order and control. But the story he and Keith concoct to explain the mysterious behavior of Keith's mother will ultimately shatter the seemingly orderly world they inhabit; it will forever alter their friendship and eventually send Stephen on a long search through his own family's past.

Mr. Frayn does a credible job of limning the point of view of a boy tottering on the cusp of adolescence, and in the early portions of the novel he also does a persuasive job of orchestrating suspense. As the book progresses, however, his coy refusal to come clean with the basic facts of the story, combined with the novel's hokey, expository conclusion, undermines the reader's willingness to trust in his narration, and the book ends on a decidedly unconvincing note: a curious lapse in craft from this usually agile and artful storyteller.

Section 9: Context: *Whose Reality?* Prompts

Experiencing reality

1. Our reality is always changing.
2. Reality is never fact but fiction.
3. We are defined by our reality.
4. Our perspective is always subjective.
5. Both reality and imagination help our understanding of the world and ourselves.
6. The reality we create is unique to our own experiences.
7. Reality is subject to our interpretations.
8. Reality can be both subjective and objective.
9. It is through a significant event that our reality changes.
10. Our realities are formed by our opinions and beliefs.
11. Reality forces us to act in extraordinary ways.
12. When we face the truth, we need to be ready to face pain and suffering.
13. People have varied reactions and responses to things because of their different realities.
14. Reality is what we want to see, not what we have to see.
15. Reality is based on the people and experiences we encounter.

Our reality in relation to others

1. Our reality is never our own, but influenced by others.
2. No two realities are identical.
3. Sometimes we lose ourselves in the reality of others.
4. We cannot escape the world that others create.
5. Accepting the reality of others is easier than accepting our own.
6. Conflict occurs as a result of different realities.
7. Some people manipulate others by distorting reality.
8. One event can produce multiple realities.
9. Only through multiple perspectives can we understand reality.
10. Some events influence our reality more significantly than others.
11. Our reality can impact others positively or negatively.
12. The realities of two people are drastically different.

Memories

1. What we chose to remember and forget shapes our reality.
2. Our memories distort our current reality.
3. Memories help us maintain a grip on reality.
4. Mixing memory and reality helps bring people pleasure and pain.
5. Memory is intrinsically connected to reality.
6. Some people suppress memories in order to cope with reality.
7. Memories are the source of our illusions.
8. We can change our dreams to become our reality.
9. Our memories teach us how to deal with reality.

Dealing with reality

1. We create illusions in order to cope with reality.
2. Illusions are safe while realities are cruel.
3. Truth is always more powerful than imagination.
4. Distorting reality can result in both good and bad.
5. What separates truth from fiction is our perspective.
6. Illusions have the power to conceal reality but can never erase it.
7. In the end, we are always forced to face reality.
8. Illusions are created both intentionally and unintentionally.
9. Reality and illusion are never dichotomous.
10. Escaping into illusion is weak while facing reality is courageous.
11. Illusions are created as a result of our disappointments and failures.
12. Fantasies are how we create a world of success and happiness.
13. Without illusion, reality is too difficult to confront.
14. We cannot be forced to confront the truth; we must be willing to.
15. What is real and fiction is irrelevant, merely what we want to believe.

Section 10: Lamorna

Lamorna

So, now I'll sing to 'ee
Its about a maiden fair
I met the other evening
In the corner of the square
She had a wild and roving eyes:
We met down to Lamorna
And we roved all night
In the pale moonlight
Away down to Lamorna

Chorus:

Twas down in Albert Square
I never shall forget:
Her eyes they shone like diamonds
And the evening it was wet wet wet
And her hair hung down in curls
She was a charming rover
And we roved all night
In the pale moonlight
Away down to Lamorna

As we got in the cab
Well I asked her for her name
And when she gave it me
Well her name it was the same
So I lifted up her veil
For her face was covered over
To my surprise
It was my wife
I took down to Lamorna

She said "I knowed 'ee well
I knowed 'ee all along
I knowed 'ee in the dark
But I did it for a lark - lark - lark
And for that lark you'll pay
For the taking of my Donna
For I declare
You'll pay the fare
Away down to Lamorna